

# Savagery

By Christopher Rivas

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T.R. Johnson

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### History Has A Habit

A thick sheet of clouds lumbers over the top of the tallest building in our school. An amorphous, undulating, dark grey mass, laced with electricity, looming overhead, its distant rumbling swept through the blacktop with a rushing wind that crashed into me as I sat on the bench, watching. Pollen stains my burgundy uniform, landing on the Fleur De Lis over my heart. The chatter of my classmates jolts to a stop as a girl, Karla, lets out a piercing screech. Everyone playing basketball, arguing over the rules of four-square, standing on the line for talking during class, and even the teacher, who looks at her phone instead of watching us, turns to look at her. Caught up in everyone's eyes, she looks away from everyone and has another student, a boy named Ronni, put her arms behind her back and walk her over to the red bench by the dismissal gate. She's unable to escape and gets caught by the cop. The melting of all the voices returned after the unnerving break in the usual chatter. Another student I can't see runs over and hides in a group of unaware students, waiting for the three cops standing by the bench to lose focus on the caught girl. They try to move away from the student, as the group doesn't know what that person is up to, but they move with the crowds, remaining hidden. Someone else runs close by the bench, and the three take off, attempting to hunt them down. The student hidden in the group dashes out to tap Karla out, and as he does, another cop hidden behind the bench springs out and tags him, but Karla escaped, slipping into the greater public and blending in, giggling frantically.

Cops and Robbers always had an interesting way of turning certain relationships on their head. Karla began dating Ronni because he was the fastest runner in our third-grade class. Ronni agreed to date her because she was one of the prettiest girls in our class, and yet, the two had nothing in common. Ronni kissed a new girl every week, and Karla tried to do the same with

boys, but for some reason, she could only ever find herself thinking about him. I would watch the scenes play out every recess for many years before Ronni moved away. How Ronni would turn a very bright red despite his darker complexion, vehemently proclaiming he did not kiss the new girl, or the tall one, or the smart one; he never learned their names. Karla knew he was lying. She saw him do it. I know because I saw her catch him many times; he never tried to hide it. Yet, every time, after about a week, Karla would return to him. A human ball that would bounce back every time she hit a wall, bouncing back to the place that threw her, Ronni. I had seen her quietly weep behind the old oak tree I sat next to each day a few times, but I never dared to talk to her about it. It wasn't my business insofar as I was a bystander, a witness to her self-imposed torture. For some odd reason, while interesting to myself, who had a very similar counter-intuitive, nigh ignorant-to-the-truth fate ahead of me, I found myself beginning to loathe her. How could anyone be so blind to the reality that he would never love her, that she would never be enough for him? When he left in the fifth grade, they embraced in a hug so loving that I could feel the warmth coming from all the way from my bench in the cold November air. What was it that I could not understand from these two fools who danced around each other emotionally each day of those two years? What about their inescapability from each other drew them together still, at the very end, at the death of their relationship? And so it was that I began my own search for a suspicious feeling growing in my chest; a subtle ache, a pulling sensation going inward that demanded something, an expanse in the flesh that could not be found within its viscera but instead that must be traced to the mind.

I began to write incessantly, the sensation of my pen gliding on the page, writing about nothing each and every day. My own simple thoughts, my questions I could find no one to answer, my day-to-day, the beauty of trees, how the overcast sky made that subtle ache turn into

an overt hungering for something unknowable within my *self*. Much more than a hunger for my mother's cooking, which at that age felt almost blasphemous to think, but I knew it to be true. When I looked high above at that sea of white and grey writhing above, I embodied it clearly and could sense its desperate gnawing, growing. I wrote this down too, though very reluctantly. That was true until I met her. The day I stopped my habit of writing for a time, with no definite number, when I stopped conversing with the place within my brain I could not understand, and instead I found it staring back at me through her, with bright, icy-grey irises, and a thin-lipped smile that felt as though she could annihilate me with a whisper. That day was one like many others, except rain finally fell that day, after two weeks of black clouds but not so much as a whisper of rain.

Elanore was my hunger personified. At least, I believed she was for a very long time. A lanky girl with pale skin, flowing black hair, and grey eyes that seemed to change color with her mood. The reality of who she was —a wealthy Spanish girl —was not what afflicted me, but rather what she represented, what her presence tipped in the scales of my mind. A girl who lacked something, something within her baser self, much like I did. From the moment I met her until the moment we lost ourselves, she became the anchor to who I am. In many ways, I became her. The cleanest memory of this comes from my fifth-grade camping trip with my class in the bayou. Two years after I met her, and somewhat orbited her through the gifted classes we shared.

It was the fourth day of our five-day and four-night camping trip. Elanore rested on a small artificially placed boulder. The cabins with our counselors weren't very far at all, but monolithic trees that stretched upward into the sky for what seemed like forever blocked them from view; the general noisiness within the cabin kept us from being heard. I sat next to her on some gravelly and grassy soil next to the boulder, the sun peered through the overcast sky. The

sun's light was further filtered through the dense canopy before gently resting on her face in a slight brush. Something about her seemed of a divine quality, like the women in pastoral paintings. In front of us, a girl with light brown skin and short, straight hair hunted butterflies, weeping. Her name was McKenzie, and the only things I remember vividly about her were the iridescent color of her tears in the faint sunlight and that she loved butterflies, but she loved a boy more.

During our trip, each student was allowed one suitcase to bring clothes, but a student named Talli had a brighter idea. He packed two uniforms, consisting of burgundy shirts and khaki pants, two sets of boxers and socks, and finally, an assortment of snacks and, most notably, makeup. We were getting around the age where the boys became obsessed with being “masculine” men and girls with being “grown” women like our mothers and fathers. Masculinity could be proven in the field games we played each day by coming out on top, but Talli had an industrial mind and knew makeup would be invaluable in a week-long trip with no access to anything like it. We weren't even allowed access to our phones. The only way to get them off Talli was with money, and not a cheap amount - five dollars, to be exact. A fortune to our little minds, but not to Elanore. She never left anywhere without a sizeable sum of money, and so she dealt in the world of “favors.”

McKenzie was one such unfortunate soul who *needed* makeup from Talli; she practically *demand*ed it, but he wouldn't budge—five dollars or no lipstick. Sometime in the middle of the night, she asked Elanore to help her out, and in her ever generous grace, she agreed, on the condition that she kill three butterflies and bring them to her. McKenzie initially refused, but something weighed on her mind heavier than her own love of nature, of butterflies, an intrinsic part of herself she was discarding for something she deemed greater. What could it have been?

She had fallen in love with a boy who worked for the camp, making him much older than us, but she believed that if she wore lipstick, she could pass as older than she was and have a chance of going on a date with him. Elanore knew it was never going to work, but she also knew that with matters of passion like love, the only way out was to burn out or actually acquire that person. In her own logic, how could she be evil for supplying the fire that would free her?

Why would Elanore ask her to do something so sinister? Boredom. In gifted classes, little challenged her for long, a quality I admired in her, one that I myself held. The only reason we ever stopped going was that our school ran out of funding for it. She always held this listless expression for life in her day-to-day. A wistful glint in her eye, casting itself into the grey mass that seemed to linger overhead ad infinitum while our teachers droned on about work packets we had finished in the first hour of an eight-hour school day. She needed something to fill that gnawing abyss. She just realized that sooner than I did, and so she filled it with *interesting* things. This ranged from hunting and killing jumping spiders in the field, to “cheating” on the boys she dated, which were the kind of micro-relationships that only lasted an evening in middle school, to making a girl kill her favorite insect for the sheer pleasure she could experience by making her do so. A girl obsessed with making herself the center around which the tiny world of our school revolved. Without knowing it, any action could revolve around her, because she would try to instruct it so. She would wear a bow in her hair, and next week, every girl *had* to wear a bow. She *demand*ed it.

I saw myself in her and her within me. I found her in my reflection. I stopped cutting my hair for a reason I couldn’t exactly understand. It grew longer, coiling down my neck in waving loose crescents, fluffy and black. Her hair didn’t ebb or flow like mine, but its length and color reminded me of her. I found her in my academics. Every time I would finish my work packet for

the day, there she was, staring out of the window, finished before me. And yet, she did things I did, too. She began to frequent my spot near the old oak tree in the field, sitting on the red bench where I frequently got lost in my own head.

This is all to say that I did nothing to help McKenzie. I sat and watched, expressionless, thinking about how interesting love was, that it could push someone to such limits. Each clasp of her hand that missed pained her as she mourned the inevitable death of the gorgeous monarch butterfly she was hunting. The place we were, hidden by these stifling trees, was a small clearing of low shrubbery. Dark green blades of grass whisked in the warm spring breeze with tiny splotches of wildflowers decorating the ground in pinks, whites, and blues. Despite the looming trees, the ground felt elevated above them, as if we rested upon a sacrificial altar. With one final clap and the crumpling of the monarch butterfly, only the second butterfly, McKenzie collapsed onto her knees, mud latched onto the pleats of her khaki uniform skirt, sobbing.

I pleaded with Elanore to let it go and give the lipstick to McKenzie. It went as such.

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The girl drags her feet as she brings over the corpse, its tiny pieces tumbling down her fingers, but before they touch the ground, the wind blows them away.

“How am I supposed to say you killed three butterflies if I only have one body?” The girl looked at her, in a confused horror, like being caught talking in class and having no excuse to save you from standing on the line during recess—that same instinctual fear. “Do it again,” Elanore demanded, “and stop taking all day. It's just a bug. It doesn't even sting. Stop being such an insufferable baby.” The irritation in her voice feels like static, a not fully tangible vibration in

the air that could spark at any given moment, just odd enough to feel in the space around you.

The girl falls to her knees, mud latching onto the pleats of her khaki skirt.

“Come on, Elanore, if she—what’s your name again?” I say, hoping to get to her.

“M...m...,” her breath keeps fighting her tears, that strangling sensation in her throat I know all too well, and she was losing.

“Come on, say it.” I needed her name to try to make Elanore care. I know not knowing someone’s name makes them easy to not care about, how odd the power of a name.

“McKenzie.” She finally manages to pry from her throat, tears gliding down over older, dried ones.

“Come on, Elanore, if McKenzie cries too loudly, the counselors are going to hear, and then what are you going to say?” Elanore wasn’t too bothered by the idea.

“Okay? Then she won’t get her lipstick, isn’t that right?” She looks over to McKenzie, who quietly nods. “And who’s to say she didn’t just fall in the mud and start crying because her skirt got dirty? Looks matter a lot, yknow. I’d cry too if I looked like that right now.” She spoke in a somewhat dreamy, bored tone, explaining McKenzie away as if it were a simple word problem.

“And what about when she inevitably tells them what you made her do?”

“What about it? How could she argue against both of us?”

“Who’s to say I’ll corroborate?” Elanore’s eyes light up, just a bit, at my question.

“Ooo, that’s a nice word. Where’d you learn it?” Elanore’s voice momentarily woke up from that dreamy boredom at the sound of a new word.

“Monster, the book we were supposed to read last year, remember?”



“Nope, seemed too boring, didn’t pay much attention when I read it. Already left the brain bank. You know how it goes with boring things, don’t you, Chris? I’m sure by tomorrow you’ll forget her name, won’t you?”

“That’s not important, Elanore, stop getting sidetracked.”

“Oh, right, because I’m sure McWhatever here is going to leave out the fact that you didn’t help her, call someone to save her, nothing. You watched with me, enjoying it like I do. Because we both know that I’m just doing what we’d both like to do.”

“And what’s that, oh divine oracle?” Elanore rolled her eyes before grabbing me by my shoulders and bringing her face close enough to feel her breath as she spoke.

“Making things interesting.” I shook her off of me as I wafted air away from my face. Her breath didn’t stink, but I wanted her to know that I thought it did anyway.

“Please, you couldn’t find breath fresher than mine if you down a bottle of Listerine. You suck at lying, Chris.”

“Wouldn’t you need me to be a good one for your plan to work?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting me those last two butterflies, McKenzie? Why are you still just sitting there?” Elanore completely ignored me. I can’t blame her. I’m pushing my luck, but then again, what else is luck good for? McKenzie slowly stumbles up, understanding that I’m not going to risk getting told on, and have no choice but to back up whatever Elanore says.

“At least make it just one. This really is taking forever, Elan.” Her hair shot up into the air from a strong gust, looking like a black cloud over her. I’ve never seen anger from her so strong that it could be felt in the short space between us. Eyes so narrow they felt like they were cutting me.

“Who told you you could call me that?” Her voice rang out, and silence in the woods followed.

“Isn’t that what Rachel calls you? I figured you and I were on a nickname basis now that you’re blackmailing me. Isn’t that what friends are for, Elan?” She closes her eyes and sweeps her hand through her hair in broad strokes, organizing each strand behind her shoulders. Her pale skin softly glowed in the thin rays of light peering through the trees. It’s as if the act of fixing her hair calmed her down. I’m surprised she didn’t lunge at me just now. I wouldn’t put it past her. Sometimes she reminds me of an animal pretending to be a human. I’d like to think a person could never be so cruel to someone else, only a savage beast could, right?

“Call me Ellen if you’re not going to use my full name, you wouldn’t get why Rachel calls me that.” Ellen’s eyes met mine with a softness that seemed to warm up that subzero gaze of hers, but as we locked eyes, McKenzie brought the mangled remains of a butterfly to Ellen’s feet.

“Okay! You’re free to go. I’ll give you the lipstick when we get back to our rooms. See you then, my little hunter.” The bubblyness in her voice was unnerving, so animated, from someone so...not animated.

“You’re a weirdo.” It felt right to say.

“No less than you, Chris. Come on, let’s go back to the cabins. I need to change out of this filthy skirt, I got filth on it.”

“I thought you said she needed to do the second one over again. Why’d you let her go with just one?”

“I’m feeling generous. Tell Talli to come see me, I’ll buy that girl’s lipstick for her. I may be a little mean, but I always, and I mean always, make good on my promises.”

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It's evident that I chose to do nothing to help McKenzie, and this is not the worst thing I did in my time orbiting Elanore. I discovered that I had an incredible capacity for tolerating questionable acts from Elanore, which allowed me to be indifferent to the suffering of others, even ignorant of the gravity of their experiences. A terrifying thought, I am hesitant to admit, but do so regardless. I must do so to come to terms with myself as a person remade through the decaying person I was at that time. I chose not to help because I feared other people, the counselors, the other students, the parents, etc, but I also feared losing her. Whenever I got a chance to ditch Elanore for good, my brain went into a frenzy. A kind of anxiety that would bubble up in my veins, a corrosive sensation that would burn, and migraines would bang within my head. I never made the right call, choosing that supplanting Elanore with other methods of understanding emotions or myself was not as *fulfilling* as she was. I was attempting to begin writing again at the time. Still, like many times before, I gave up in favor of pursuing whatever misadventure Elanore was going to get up to that day, even if she frightened me deeply. She was capable of great harm in a way that had no repercussions for herself, and she did it so effortlessly that I knew it was only a matter of time before she would do it to me. And she did, but before that, she was still a little girl at the end of the day. A girl who believed the world owed her an answer to her primal emptiness, or at the very least, a remedy for it through other people. But she also had the same deep-seated fear that anyone who desires to take the leash of life and yank it back by its collar does, that one day the dog that is life will rip into her. Reveal the flesh beneath the skin, and latch onto the bone, a grip she could not break free from that would reveal her. She came close one day in English class.

We had just moved from our normal English class into our gifted ones after lunch, and four other students sat in the class with us for a total of six. One of these students was the girl mentioned above briefly, Rachel, Elanore's best friend apart from myself. She will become relevant later. These gifted classes were glorified art classes, at least the English ones were—our teacher, Ms. Samuels, held a philosophy that the only way to attain something *real* within ourselves, to begin the lifelong march inward for understanding, was to do so through art, more specifically, writing. The literary mind, she taught, was a tool that could topple nations, referencing the American and French Revolutions, redefine what it meant to be human, referencing the Three-Fifths Compromise and the Emancipation Proclamation. It could even reframe what it means to exist at all, referencing broad stroke philosophy from Socrates to Heraclitus, to the small pages we read of Nietzsche. I had never loved a class so dearly as hers, as, despite my lack of writing in my free time, when I was instructed to do so by an authority figure, I was happy to do anything; obedience was a harsh law learned through belt and cracked skin under my family, and it stuck very well. When we didn't read, we took on writing exercises. Ms. Samuels stressed that not everything in the class had to stick; not everything would stick, but so long as our brains engaged with it, somewhere deep within ourselves, the knowledge would stick with us and follow us into our lives, manifesting itself. Accessing this part of ourselves would be easiest through art.

That day, she tasked us to write a simple poem about ourselves. Fifteen lines about who we *are* within our own minds. How we understand ourselves. This idea terrified Elanore so much that she shattered her meticulously curated mask of indifference to the world and burst from her seat, calling the class stupid and useless before storming out. She never returned to the gifted English class, opting to remain bored in the standard English class each Thursday from then on. I

hold no doubt that revealing she, in fact, had very strong emotions and was not a mysteriously withdrawn and bored girl played a major part in her decision not to return. A piece of her died in that classroom, the piece that she was untouchable, and so it would become that she would fall from her vice grip on our class and into the abyss that she sought to fill.

History tends to repeat itself in this manner. Those who seek control eventually crumble, if not through their own fault, then from those they seek to stifle, finally pushing upward hard enough to turn the world on its head. I found out some time ago that I had a “royal lineage,” and this played a great role in my ability to be indifferent and ignore the suffering of others at that age. My father had always told me that I was born to lead, that I harbored blood that made me naturally surpass others. This is why I was “gifted.” This is why I never struggled long. That I hail from a long line of Chieftans recognized by the English crown as royalty, kings of kingdoms lost to the ashes of time and slaughter. One can only imagine the damage this did to my self-perception as a kid. It's the reason why I found so much of my evil reflected through Elanore and back into me. I may not have had the wealth she had, but I had the same inflated ego she did. I was just taught that humility was the greatest strength of someone superior, so I tried not to show it, and clearly failed many times. Despite my gifted blood, I still knew very little about the world. For example, I believed I held indigenous North American blood, when in fact, my blood ran through the isthmus that is Central America, in Nicaragua, to be exact. But it did not matter where exactly I came from; my father had not told me that yet. What mattered was that I was “royalty.” Someone divinely chosen to lead a people I never knew or met. This was enough to feed my mind that I was something important, that I could belong to Elanore because I could finally look her in the eye. The rich Spanish girl who made the world as we knew it at that age bow to her, and the poor indigenous boy who believed he was a divine savior. It was only a

matter of time before we killed ourselves, at least, these iterations of ourselves, and we could sense it. But what harm could come from some self-indulgence before it was all over? The fact that no matter what, this would all end when we graduated from our middle school was a frightening concept looming overhead. At that same time, it was electrifying. We could be exaggerated versions of our selves, knowing that the charade would have to end one day. This would be it, the solution to our boredom. The lack that stalked our minds in every shared moment was something we could fill with pointless things, whether it was sitting on the bench together, staring upwards into the gray sky, or watching others suffer from events she orchestrated.. It was an ingenious idea, until it came my turn.

The poem I wrote during English gifted class, the one that Elanore stormed out of and never came back to, in its original form, has been lost to time, but I came back to it in high school. A time in my life stained by the sepia colored poison of nostalgia, where I sought to dig up the grave of the past, its metaphorical soil still freshly disturbed, to seek closure. The oldest iteration of the poem I still have follows as such:

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Redskin  
(After Langston Hughes)

I am a redskin,  
Red as blood is red,  
Red as my tribal paints  
I've been a prisoner,  
Forced to walk an infinite trail below a cruel sun  
I walked until a pitch black spectre took me.

I've been a helper,  
Under my word the colonies bloomed,  
I planted the corn of Virginia.  
I've been a savage,  
I had killed the colonists,  
I was the reason the colonists starved.  
I've been a victim,  
Evicted from my ancestral home,  
I had to walk until my mouth began to foam.  
I am a redskin,  
Red as my blood is thick,  
Red as the roses I left fallen on the trail.

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How easy it is for a child to remain ignorant. I had made a big fuss of my newly found identity in middle school. I began to tell myself stories in the pages of my notebook to try to contain the newfound grief I held. Its weight was exacerbated each time the grey mass unfolded overhead, each time I saw Elanore, the colonizer, each time I saw her, and despite that resentment, I couldn't find myself wanting to escape her. I never planted the corn of Virginia, nor did I walk the Trail. My ancestors survived the initial waves of colonization; it was the voracious sea of time that swept us away until modern massacres sought to finish the job. Still, that anger and grief I inherited through spilled blood not my own reflected into my eyes in every moment I saw Elanore's maroon uniform. I hardly looked in the mirror anymore; I didn't need to. I could see myself in the reflection of her eyes, and that was enough for me. Every student wore the

same thing every day after all. It was easier to identify us with them, for safety, of course, protection from some *other* threat. The threat was never something that could come within ourselves, wearing our indicators of belonging, no, it was much easier to place our fear onto that which was not us. How childish we all were, how childish I was.

It is remarkably easy to be naive in this way. Easy to repeat the same mistakes that our forebears have made innumerable times. One such mistake is that death is something distant, some place foreign, as if it were not with us at all times, a hair's breadth away, in our own homes, in our loved ones. A lesson my eldest brother, Kenny, learned in December of my first year in high school. He was in his kitchen sometime after sunset, his children in their rooms, his wife away on some business, who knows what he could have been doing there. What he could not have known is that some other presence was behind him, the incarnation of death, silent, unknowable, but always at the back of our minds. In a moment, at the pull of a silent trigger, he fell stiffly, quietly onto the ground, his blood clawing outward from his skull further and further onto the white tile of his kitchen floor, as if by escaping the wound he could live for a millisecond more. How sudden death can arrive, how many different shapes it can take in our minds. One would never imagine their loved ones would be the driving force of it, much less one's spouse. Such was the case for my eldest brother. But death did not come for his children, this matter was not personal; it was bigger than that. History was at work here. And history has a habit of repeating itself.

Political assassinations are far from new, but they were very new to me on a personal level, at least, I thought they were, not entirely aware that many of the things I did growing up were the same thing, just on a less literal level. My people, the Miskitu tribe, are no strangers to death in the name of a way of life, like many tribes are. My brother was the beginning of a long



line of mysterious deaths behind multiple leaders of our tribe. A high-ranking Elder in our tribe, a woman senior to my father in his fifties, found as if the life in her body had been sucked out by something wicked. A poison, a vicious concoction that she mistakenly ate when she took my father's plate at a routine dinner at a routine meeting with the Council of Elders and other tribal figures. Some people believed a demon had taken her life, our tribe has long since shed our polytheistic Gods in favor of the Father, the Christian God. A distant emblem of colonization carried into the present, history made flesh, like Elanore, a repetition. A story I reprise now, as I wear a golden cross on my neck. My father was just a couple of minutes late, conversing about Kenny with some other leaders. Death lives in the shadow of each of my people, but it knows my father intimately; this would be far from the only attempt on his life he narrowly escaped.

My father told me the story of this moment the day he returned from his yearly trip to Nicaragua. My father is a storyteller first and foremost, a father second, and a husband last. Any time my father has time for me, he would tell me about his tribe, their stories, their music, their sorrow, their massacres. He had survived one, and so had his father and his father before him. My father's bloodline runs reddish brown with spilled blood. He told me my blood flows with this similar hue, and that is why he tells stories. That is why we must tell stories. To repeat an action is to give it power. To give it narrative presence in the story of our lives, as my father said to me. To tell that which is intrinsic to our people, our myths, our sorrows, everything, is to give them power, and with each passing tongue it flows through, it gains their voice behind it. Who knows just how many voices echo my father when he tells me of the Sun God or the Mountain God, of the Red Christmas massacre, of the founder of the tribe, Miskut. I imagined a mass vaster than the night behind him comprised of shadows shifting in shape when he first told me this in middle school, all chanting his words unconsciously, as if they were zombies, waiting to

be temporarily brought back from eternity each time these stories were told. I wonder if they are here now despite the spoken word lacking its flesh in this moment. I wonder if they will be behind me when I tell my children. I wonder what it will do to them, what it will create in them, what it will kill.

This notion of dying before death is something given to me, something I repeat now, by my father and mother. That one can be living and dead at the same time. Periods where we do not know who or what we are, when we are wandering, bored out of our minds in search of something to do and someone to be. In these periods, we are undead, so to speak. I have had many, but the first was with Elanore, the very first time she struck me. It was nothing notable, a trivial moment where I was speaking to her best friend, Rachel, on the red benches I always sat at. The dying leaves of the oak tree fluttered down in the wind, clinging to our shirts as we spoke. Elanore had been looking for one of us; it didn't matter who, anyone would do, just to fill in the time that was recess, where there was nothing to do, but enough freedom to find something worth doing in her eyes. When she saw us, without her, how cold she must have felt, to have been trapped with herself for such an unbearable amount of time; those ten or so minutes after recess had begun when she was alone in her own mind, free to explore that which she wanted so desperately to ignore. When she saw us, and I saw her, I knew it was coming. I had seen that ignition in her eyes, the sputtering of a wrath so primordial it made the hairs on my neck and arms stand as if they were on the shoreline when Columbus's ship landed. The slap that proceeded to crash into my face could have swiveled my head off, and no bystander would have been surprised. But oddly enough, no one saw, or at least seemed to care. Rachel was the only witness, but she was part of *us*, the three of us.

Despite the many kids around us during recess, it was as if the view of the world had magnified itself from the history I knew, the weight I felt in my blood, down to this tiny spot on the black top from a bird's eye view, our burgundy uniforms sticking out starkly against it. I accepted it gracefully. Humility is the strongest trait of the superior, I thought, among the three rules my parents had given me to govern my life, which prohibited me from action. I could never hit a woman, I could never hit someone until they touched me first, and finally, I must be the best at whatever I do. The best leader, the best doctor, the best son, the best student, the best punching bag. And so it was that I would find myself in this repeating scene with her. A wrathful God, that is what she seemed like to me, a spitting image of the Sun God with glass skin and flowing black hair, as She was described by my father, the heavy hand of my parents, the beauty fitting of something divine, directions like those of our teachers. She was everything I was taught to follow, fear, respect, and to love. Rachel was there to see it all, the necessary witness to the unspoken marriage I unconsciously embraced with open arms, as if all that sitting on the bench thinking every school day was an invitation, a conjuring, for someone like her to devour me.

I died that day, certainly. I could never be the boy who had no true friends; Elanore and Rachel were such. I could never be the boy who floated off into thought each day, despite my many unknowing attempts to do so daily, because Elanore always had something to do, something to say, and I always had to listen intently. I could never be the son who needed to excel academically for the sake of his parents, for the sake of a people he must one day liberate, because I began to do it for her. No, I was nothing less than someone Elanore found interesting, nothing more than the space a human being should take up but didn't, a walking grey mass, thundering and pulsing with the threat of something unknown, something forming, in progress. Like my parents phrased it, I was undead from that day forward, yet I still felt everything

strongly. Maybe even stronger in this transitional stasis I found myself in. Every sadness was a great sorrow. I wept at the most minor fall, my blood simmered and steamed at every 98 on a test, my heart sank to the core of the Earth where the God of Absence (think something like the Christian Devil) was said to reside each time Elanore gracefully touched my face, as if she were blessing me with the warmth of her palm. These were all feelings I was very devoid of prior to Elanore slapping me. She ruptured something within me that allowed the rawest sections of myself to ache under the morning sun. She cast her eclipse corona over me, staring down in the kind of ecstasy one feels when they finally own something they really want, like that brand new phone you've been really wanting, that life-changing surgery for your mother, that old coloring book the testing proctor said you could have after you finished your LEAP exam with two hours to spare.

### **What more could I need?**

Elanore was a life-saving deity to me because she made it so easy to ignore myself. I was the subservient savage to her colonial divinity. How lucky she was to find someone cowardly enough to fully subject themselves to her will, how lucky I was to find someone who was willing to tell me what to think so I could ignore the ancestral burden of being the figurehead of a people some day that felt so inescapably close yet so unattainably far, so that I could ignore that gnashing hunger in my chest that arose when I saw Ronnie and Karla hug, that sensation that felt so distant now under Elanore. She washed these things from me for a long time. There was never a dull moment with her, and never an idle moment with me. It reached a point where I would purposefully begin talking with the girls in our gifted class, especially Rachel, because it would incinerate what little regard for her mysterious-girl facade after the poem fiasco Elanore had, and

force her to take action, to reassert herself as the decision maker, that I was not the one who spoke to others, she was. Not that it was anything too different from my life before her.

Classmates only came to me for answers; it was no skin off my back to continue ignoring them, and it felt almost like a source of pride to have someone like Elanore to *demand* that I continue doing it. I belonged to someone, and this seemed to soothe the teeth snapping in my chest, demanding to spend my time devouring any source of stimulation to keep boredom at bay.

I found myself more and more like her each passing day. A cruelty began to swell within me, like her shadow had begun to become my own, as if her voice would join in when I asked my father questions about my tribe that he said I was not ready to hear the answer to yet. It was easy, admittedly, the same way it was easy to use McKenzie to try to appeal to Elanore's minimal human compassion. After all, what could someone so divine need compassion for? But that was a very Elanore thing to do. To use someone as a tool. Would I actually willingly do that? It came to me so easily in the moment and did not come to disturb me until many years after the fact, when I was looking back at those years with her, repeating the stories over again in my head, giving them more power. I found myself finding a kind of pleasure in denying the students who wanted answers from me during tests. At first, I gave it to these desperate classmates because I pitied them, and I enjoyed the fact that they spoke to me at all, even if it was only because they needed me. I loved helping people whenever I had the opportunity. My parents always told me I had a bad habit of talking to strangers and offering to help those I didn't know, because it was something that made people smile. I told my mother that I liked making other people smile. She told me that I was born to bring light into the world.

After a while, I grew sick of it; no one wanted to speak to me outside of class. I was the answer boy. To be relegated to something so lowly, someone of my status? Impossible. Elanore

only made it easier to curve them, but after a while, I adopted a new habit. I found a cruel sense of enjoyment whenever someone asked me for an answer, because I could withhold it. They could be indebted to me, owe me something. I could own their personhood and use it when I needed it. What more could I ask for out of the exchange of being used? That is, of course, if they didn't take the other option, which was to tell the teacher they were cheating, which would absolutely result in their failing the test and potentially flunking them out of the school altogether. We had a very strict no-cheating policy. The question of whether it was too much like Elanore to do this kind of thing was irrelevant, because it became how far was Christopher willing to take it, to use this foreign piece he had acquired from her, and how far could it take him beyond her. Elanore was a valuable tool in many ways; most ironically, she would eventually be the vital instrument used to dismantle herself. The most important atom of this formative thought process in my existence as a subject to Elanore's majesty was in that same camping trip from earlier with McKenzie, only I did not know, I could now have known that Elanore had much more going on without me, in times I never had access to her or her to me; she had another subject serving her.

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“All groups step forward! Let's have a good time and get ready to win! On the count of three, the first of each group of three will run for the pillar and climb to the top. It's about thirty feet from her and thirty feet up, so run fast and we'll make sure your harnesses are on tight before you go up! Once you're on top, grab the flag and carefully make your way across the thin bridge to the other pillar, and climb down! Or if you're very brave, you can jump off and let the harness do all the work. Does all of that make sense? If it does, clap for me and clap for your last day! It's been a pleasure having you guys out with us!” The counselor stands gleaming before us,

a pearly white smile, million-dollar teeth, and smooth skin that glistens a golden brown in faint sunlight and moisture. I wish I could say more about her or any of them, but I never even bothered to learn their names. This trip lasted only five days and four nights with the entire class. I'll never see any of the staff again after this, so what was the effort worth knowing them?

With the roaring sound of applause, the skin on my arm feels as though it's about to break open from intense goosebumps. That pillar, in reality, just a log with metal hand-grips jetting out the side, is way too high. I can't climb that high, I can't. I can't do it. I've never understood why heights make me so nauseous, like I'll just fall over dead down here by just looking up at high places. Rachel looked over at me, her skin carries with it hints of color, the kind of traces of light brown that made her distinguishable from someone like Ellen, but passable for white if you didn't look at her too long. Her light brown hair fell generously across her shoulders in two fluffy pigtails. Everyone wore their black uniforms today, a sign of our seniority in our school. We all share the same misguided belief that wearing our black uniforms, which could only be obtained by passing the fifth-grade benchmark test, makes us better at everything when we have them on, but I need that hope right now. Rachel makes her way to me, her aged black and white vans were stained with mud and dried soil.

"You good?" Despite sitting with Elanore constantly in our gifted classes and being the highest scorer in our school, above Ellen and me, nothing about her was formal, unlike her friend.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine. Not a fan of high places." Rachel's green eyes have tiny flecks of brown in them that remind me of the bayou we've spent the last week in. It's a shame I haven't seen her much, even during our free time. I haven't seen her and Ellen in the same place since we got here, which is odd since they're usually inseparable at school. I wonder. The

counselors have the boys and girls separated for each event, but they promised on the last day that the two events would be co-ed.

“You’re afraid of heights?” Her voice is almost constantly in a whisper, higher-pitched even by our pre-pubescent standards.

“Something like that.”

“You’re such a bitch sometimes.” Her voice may be soft, but nothing about what she says ever is. I know by now she means nothing by it, but I’d be lying if that didn’t make my eye twitch.

“One!” The counselor sounded off.

“And I bet you money you won’t even reach halfway up.” Rachel’s never been the type to take a challenge lightly, but with how short she is, each grip would be a full head above her. No chance she makes it.

“Bet with no money? Empty words from a little baby.”

“I have Ellen, and I’m not little.”

“Who?”

“Elanore.”

“What makes you think she’ll give you any money without doing something? And why are you calling her Ellen now? That’s not what she goes by?”

“I think she owes me one right now. Plus, she told me to call her that.” Rachel’s eyebrow raises in an exaggerated arch, trying to insinuate something by it.

“It’s not like that. I’m sure she’d kill me if I even tried to hug her.”

“Two! Start lining up in your groups.”



“Right. Well, if she really does owe you one, I’m up for it.” Rachel was the only reason girls were allowed to wear the khaki pants, which only boys could wear in their uniform, after she pestered the vice principal to change the uniform policy. She said there’s no loss if girls can wear them because most girls think the pants are ugly anyway, but they’re much cheaper than the khaki skirts. Rachel came from a poorer family like mine. She was always trying to help her parents and herself at the same time, if possible. She rolled the openings at the bottom of her pants up tightly and took a couple of pins out of her pockets, sticking them through the fabric so the folds wouldn’t come undone. A big fan of arts and crafts, I’m sure she probably stole in from the resource room in the cabins when we made dolls of ourselves on the second day.

“Well, you enjoy climbing your death trap, I’ll be safe here on the ground where normal people are.” Rachel let out a singular, smug laugh with her mouth closed.

“I would say that’s unfair, but I wouldn’t be surprised if you tripped and fell in the mud before you even made it to the log, so I don’t really care. I’ll collect my money from Elanore after I beat your sorry ass.”

“Who said I was the one you’re competing with?” Rachel looks at me, tilting her head partially to the side.

“Huh?”

“If you want my five dollars, you need to beat Ellen to the halfway mark.” The fifteen-foot mark has a green cloth on the handle to let the students climbing know they’re halfway up, aiming to give us hope to reach the top, marked by a red cloth. Rachel has a habit of biting the inside of her cheek when she gets nervous or anxious, and she was doing it right now. I knew I got her. Her pride couldn’t let her say no, but there’s no way she could beat Elanore up with her lanky frame. As Rachel opens her mouth to respond, the counselor speaks first.

“Three! Runner one from each group get to it!”

Ellen, Rachel, and four other students sprint through the mud toward the logs that seem to pierce the sky. Rachel nods at me before she takes off. Two students slip and crash into the mud, and they let out a frustrated giggle that seeks to shirk off the embarrassment of falling. Ellen and Rachel reach the log at the same time, and the last two students are only seconds behind. The counselors attach their harnesses and check that they’re tight before sending them up. The counselor checking Ellen’s takes longer than Rachel’s; I might be screwed.

“Aren’t you supposed to run? Go!” A student from behind me shoves me forward. I really should learn all my classmates’ names. We’ve all been in the same class for four years now, but they barely talk to me, so I haven’t bothered yet. I know each of their faces at least. This is the boy who tried to impress one of the other gifted kids, a girl named Valery, with golden-orange coiled hair that looked like a lion’s mane, by doing push-ups in front of her, unaware that she was forbidden by her father to date a boy until high school. What an idiot he made of himself that day. His friends called him chippy for a week after that, because after he hit fifty push-ups, he fell on his face and chipped one of his front teeth. He’s made a habit of getting into fights with anyone who calls him that ever since.

“Nah, you can go ahead of me, I’m sure you can close the distance before they can reach the top, isn’t that right, Chippy?” Chippy lunges at me, grabbing my shirt, but not nearly as strong as Ellen, I gradually move his grip off me. The counselor who described the game earlier runs over and pushes us apart.

“What are you two doing?”

“He tried to hit me!”

“He called me Chippy?” His tooth was still chipped, so the counselor could clearly see what I was referencing.

“Why would you call him that? It’s not nice to bully your classmates. Whose teacher is back at school? I need to talk to her.” I can feel the heavy pulses of my heart when she asks for my teacher’s name. It can’t possibly be that serious.

“He pushed me first, he started it!”

“I’m telling your teacher about both of you.” Her voice looks down on me, chastizing but soft, as if I haven’t gotten past crying when someone raises their voice at me.

“That’s not fair! He literally started.”

“And you insulted him about something he can’t control. That isn’t fair either.” I could feel anger pushing up against my throat, something that has always choked me up in my life has been unfairness. There are very few things I hate more than unfair treatment.

“He’s the one who didn’t want to run when he was told to!”

“I have asthma! I can’t do that run! I haven’t even taken my medicine yet. You want me to die?” A little bit dramatic, but it should work in my favor. The counselor backed away from the two of us.

“Why didn’t you tell us you have asthma? I wouldn’t have told you to line up with everyone. You could have sat with the other counselors on the benches.”

“I don’t like to talk about it.” The counselor briefly nods in understanding. The knot in my throat breaks up.

“Look, we can move past this if you apologize to, what is your name?”

“Erin.”

“If you apologize to Erin.” It should be so simple. So astoundingly simple, but for some reason, my throat constricts again. I struggle to say I’m sorry.

“I. I’m.” As I force the words out, tears stream down my face, and the blood in my veins runs out with frustration. One of the few things I hate more than unfairness is when I cry. The words feel insurmountable to my vocal cords. My throat burns with the sharp feeling of their contortion. Air gathers in my lungs before exploding out in a violent coughing fit. The tears fall generously across my face as I struggle to breathe.

“I’m sorry.” I finally manage. Erin looks down at me, and a smile brushes across his face. I’ve never felt an anger so pure that I thought of strangling him, just as I was experiencing from my own body. I’ll get him back soon enough. Ellen and Rachel ran over after they had completed the course. I didn’t get to see who won.

“Are you okay? Do you want me to bring you to the nurse’s room?” I shake my head as I regain my composure. How humiliating. “Well, let me know if you need me to, I’m always close by.” The counselor finally walks away. Erin falls back in line as the second wave of runners wait for their countdown to reach three.

“One!”

“Who won?” I ask as I hold my neck.

“Oh, your little bet? Rachel did.” The shock almost sends me into another coughing fit.

“You’re lying, no way.” Rachel looks at me, a satisfied grin cast up at me. I shift my hands to rest on top of my head, one of the many ways my parents taught me to regain my steady breathing.

“Nope. She told me about your bet while we were climbing, so I may or may not have slowed down a bit so she’d reach the green before me.” Ellen and Rachel now both share the same self-assured satisfaction gleaming from their faces. I’m so sick of these two.

“Two! Start lining up!”

“So I guess you don’t owe me anything then, Ellen.”

“Who said I owed you anything at all? You didn’t say anything to save your own skin. You did yourself a favor, not me. You owe me one now.” Ellen’s smile is so overbearing that you can hear it in every word as she speaks.

“One! Start running!”

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The final game before we go is basic freeze tag with one caveat. The first four people to be tagged by the first seeker become seekers themselves. The favor I owe Ellen is to be paid off right now. The “arena” is a fenced-off portion of the bayou with a few large trees, the ones with gray hair and vines that wrap them in vivid green dresses, breaking up visibility so there are plenty of blind spots that the counselors can’t see. The counselors themselves aren’t in the arena. Instead, they watch from the fences, plenty of places they can’t see because of it. Ellen volunteered to be the first seeker, and my favor is that I told her where I’m going to hide. I’m lying down behind one of the fallen logs that litter the arena, covered in fallen leaves to try and hide myself. I’m going to use this chance to get Chippy back for his stupid smile. There’s plenty of rustling going on as people settle in their spots. Some students climb the trees, while others hide inside hollow logs or tree stumps, and some people crouch around the obstacles, ready to run when they’re inevitably spotted. The counselors are supposed to count down to a whistle right now, but I can’t hear them if they are.

With some final rustling, I see Rachel slowly crouching into a large hollow stump, the entrance facing away from the direction Ellen would come from, smart. Finally, the piercing whistle silences all the rustling in the entire arena; only the sound of whisking leaves in the warm wind remains. A girl screams at the top of her lungs, the word spider. The counselors laugh as a whistle sounds off again. There would be a whistle after each person caught to become a seeker. Ellen found her and fast. The sound of fast steps stops abruptly on the other side of my log, followed by frantic giggling. A boy falls over my log and next to me, stumbling while he tries to get up to run. The crunch of leaves beneath his feet gets quieter as he runs off. I wonder why the seeker didn't chase him.

"You can't be serious, Chris." The sound of a familiar voice. I look up to see her silhouette as the sun glitters through her hair, bathing her in blinding light like some angel.

"Took you long enough, considering you knew I was here, Ellen."

"I like to savor the moment." A whistle fires off. I brush the dead leaves and dirt off me as Ellen sprints off in another direction while barking orders. She's having way too much fun hunting everyone down. "Get everyone you can! Try to beat me!" I roll my eyes at her orders. Walking over to Rachel's hiding spot, I can see the faint figure of her shoe in the surprisingly dark interior of the stump.

"I know you're in there."

"Wait, wait, wait, I have a deal with Elan, please don't catch me. Please." Her speech was fast, the words falling out of her mouth with the sound of spit. Odd.

"Why should I after you screwed me over?" The third and fourth whistles go off in quick succession. No doubt Ellen getting busy.

“Oh come on, you have to admit it was funny.” I can’t help but smile as I crouch down to grab her. But I stop myself. I have an idea.

“Why do you call Elanore, El-ahn? If you tell me, I’ll look the other way.”

“What? That? I call her that because I fucked up saying her name in like fourth grade and she wouldn’t stop bringing it up, so that’s just what I call her now.”

“That’s it?” What a disappointing answer. But then again, I don’t know what would have been a satisfying one.

“Yeah! Now go!”

“Alright, alright.” She repositions herself in the stump as I walk away.

Reaching the other side of the arena, there are about nine students frozen in different positions. One lying down, the other caught in a half fall against a tree, two mid-run, a couple in the branches of the same tree, one hiding behind a stump, likely tagged from behind without seeing Ellen coming, the last two face down on the floor, probably fell mid-run.

“Tag us out!” One of the ones on the floor whisper yells.

“I’m one of the seekers. You can’t talk when you’re tagged, so be quiet.” A satisfying sentence to say. I didn’t see Chippy among them; he must still be untagged somewhere.

It’s oddly serene, the sight of all the frozen people among the dangling Spanish moss and old trees, like a garden of statues. I wrap back around near where Rachel was to see Ellen looking inside the stump, but Rachel wasn’t coming out.

“Is anyone in there?” I shout from a good distance away, feigning ignorance.

“Nothing, did you catch Rachel?”

“Haven’t seen her.” Ellen shakes her head disapprovingly.

“Have you seen Erin?” Ellen looks at me, her face twisted, confused.

“No? You looking for him? I saw him waiting on a branch, but when he saw me, he jumped off and ran. I don’t feel like dealing with that chase right now. I *need* to get Rachel.”

“How about this,” I walk up to Ellen, “You focus on Rachel, I’ll get Chippy.”

“How? You’re not even close to fast enough.”

“I have a plan.” Ellen’s smile curls at her lips like some fiendish creature, hardly human in appearance.

“Alright, smart guy, let’s see if it pays off.” She jogs away to a relatively barren part of the arena, only fallen logs scattered around, but Rachel is small enough to make use of them. I make my way to one of the trees. Erin didn’t seem to be up in the branches of this one. A benefit of the whistle system was that no one knew who the other seekers were. I need to climb up. Feeling my heart plummet to my stomach, I grasp at the thick vines strapped to the bark for a grip. Deep breaths laboriously pull and drag as sweat beads and fall from my forehead. It’s only like seven feet, I shouldn’t be so damn scared. I swallow my thoughts and probably a little bit of vomit as I slowly make my way up the tree step by step. There’s a large, flat area between two of the bigger branches where I can sit and wait for Chippy.

Finally throwing myself up into the space between the branches, I feel like I’m going to drop dead at any second, plenty of coughs welling up in my lungs, but I can’t let them come out. Erin slowly walks by the base of my tree.

“Hey!” I hiss. Erin flinches and looks up.

“How in the hell did you get up there?” His shock makes him forget to whisper.

“Climbing. How else?” I sharply whisper.

“You a seeker?” He slowly backs away from the tree.



“Why would I climb a tree with no one in it if I were a seeker? Get up here before one of them sees or hears you.”

“I’d never thought I’d ever see you do anything remotely athletic.”

“Please, I’m more capable than you think. I just don’t feel like showing it.”

“Sure. Give me a hand.”

“Oh? I thought I wasn’t athletic enough to get up here, not to mention pulling you up?” I couldn’t touch him ahead of time, then he would be frozen before I could really enjoy the moment.

“Can it already. We sound like ghosts with all this whispering. You’re going to get us caught.” Erin quickly climbs up the tree without my help and sits next to me in the flat space. We sit quietly for a couple of minutes before Erin speaks again. I’m wondering how I can make this as gratifying as possible when I tag him.

“Hey.”

“What’s up?”

“I’m sorry about pushing you earlier. And for grabbing you like that. I get angry fast, man. You know Mr. Eugene?”

“The I.S.S. guy?”

“Yeah, he’s my Uncle. He gets tired of seeing me get sent to his room when I get suspended for the day for fighting. I’m trying to figure it out. He tells me the best way to get over my anger is by saying I’m sorry first. So...I’m sorry, bro.” I’m a little shocked, I must admit. To think someone so brutish could be trying so hard. It almost makes me feel bad for this. Almost.

“Don’t worry about it. Things happen. Say, do you actually know who’s tagged?”

“Aside from that tall girl? Nah. You?” Erin stays scanning the arena, away from me, how trusting.

“I know it's her and another girl, the one who screamed earlier, but I don't know the other two.” As we talk, I see Rachel run by my tree, and we fall silent as she gets backed up against the fence. Ellen closes in on her.

“She's so screwed,” Erin whispers. Rachel's green eyes begin to sparkle with water. Why is she crying over a game? Ellen looks around the fences; none of the counselors have a clear line of sight on their spot, tucked into a corner by my tree, and another on at an adjacent angle. Did she plan to corral her here? She must not have spotted us as she slowly walks up to Rachel.

“About as screwed as you are, bro.”

“Huh?” He quickly turns around, his dark brown skin shines brightly as the sun pokes through the leaves of the tree onto his skin. Before he can jump off the branch, his foot slips, and he falls onto the branch, limbs hanging off the sides. I tag his leg, and he lies motionless on the branch, head facing away from Ellen and Rachel. A giggle climbs from my mouth as I look down at him, but my mouth snaps shut, and my eyes sharpen on Ellen and Rachel.

It was for only a moment that I saw it. Ellen was forcibly kissing Rachel against the fence, tears falling violently down her face, Ellen smiling. They looked at me, one pleading, the other angry.

The Spanish moss sways, leaves gently falling periodically from the trees, landing at Ellen's feet.

“What did you see, Chris?” Rachel and Ellen ask at the same time, seeking different answers.

“What the fuck?” The first time I ever cursed in my entire life was that moment.

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That was another thing I started using for myself. I had never cursed prior to that day; the gold cross around my neck forbade it. Much like Elanore pointed out, that cross forbade many things I did when I was with her, but I did them anyway. What did it matter to add another forbidden thing to my list of sins, and besides, Rachel made it seem so easy to say, why would I treat it any differently? It was no secret to me that my sense of morals began to collapse into something very similar to what Elanore held, despite her Catholic faith, that the only things that mattered were those that served us. People were an example of such things, and Rachel, her best friend, was no exception. Assaulting her like she did on that day was not where she stopped, and there would be no line drawn anywhere for her.

At the same time that I began to help others on tests, as mentioned earlier, Elanore began to lose interest in me because I was simply taking too long to figure out. Elanore found people interesting so long as they remained mysterious, and I had many things I never told her about myself. This isn't the case because I was some sort of sophisticated person who held his secrets well, but because I didn't even understand why I felt the things I did. So her guess was as good as mine. Chronologically speaking, this was a long time after she first slapped me and continued to do so, but the same old song and dance can only be repeated so many times before something has to break. It's almost something necessary, a rupture in the norm demanded by something greater than ourselves to happen, a kind of Destiny. That was this period where we distanced ourselves from our own orbits and began to gain new people in our circles. I surrounded myself with the students who needed me, even if all they offered was their fleeting presence and whatever favors I could pry from them to pass the time, keep things *interesting*. Elanore began to hunt down new prospects, walking around aimlessly during recess and after-care, looking for any

boy or girl who had a habit of being alone. The silence they filled was something she was keen to notice as she walked by. She was shopping for a new toy until she got bored again. She would then spend some weeks trying to crack their personality, find what makes them them, before trying to dismantle it. Whether she was successful or not didn't matter; what did was that she could, at the very least, fracture them as a person. Elanore saw herself as some kind of detective, trying to find what's *real* about people. The things they dread to have known. After exposing it, she would gain some kind of satisfaction at her victim's vulnerability before moving on to the next. A natural disaster all contained within the body of a middle school girl, hell bent on killing the versions of ourselves each student tried to curate, at a time when everything was the end of the world to us. When having a bad hair day meant it was your last day, a breakup meant you'd never love again, and being embarrassed made you wish the entire world would explode.

Children tend to deal in these kinds of absolutes.

For one girl, these absolutes were wildly apparent. Rachel, even though she'd rather die than admit it at the time, knew she really enjoyed spending time with the two of us because we were just so incredibly weird. Most kids talked about sports, or games, or general gossip, and then there were the three of us, who still talked about these things daily, but we had the odd minds to question, in earnest, the dumbest things about being a person. What did it mean to exist? We sat down on some benches by the sandy field after class, which was supposed to be an outdoor classroom, an unconventional approach to education that our school abandoned in two weeks. Elanore touched her arms, face, and chest before valiantly asserting, "I'm right here, idiot." I said that I didn't really know. But Rachel, who had a habit of remembering our gifted packets better than the two of us, brought up Descartes. "I think, therefore I am." Elanore and I laughed before telling Rachel she sounded ridiculous. Like some kid who thought they knew

everything about anything. The irony is not lost on me. These small moments between us were things Rachel cherished, memories we seemed to forget as we drifted apart more and more, but they kept looping in Rachel's head. Their power was so insurmountable that she had to do something about our distance. Bridge the gap and have the three of us together again, even if Elanore took advantage of her again, even if I remained none the wiser, even if she would do the same to me. So it was.

Before this coming scene, let me say how this story will go. I know my side of this day very well, of course, but after a lot of conversations in high school, I know how the other two sides go, especially Rachel's. So, I'll follow them closely and reconstruct the story that would continue to repeat between the three of us, even the portions I was not present for.

\*

Rachel had a plan, a far cry from something of Elanore's caliber, to get everyone back together. If everyone was drifting apart, the only option was to set them on a collision course by knocking them out of their new groups. Elanore had taken on a small flock of boys a grade under her that would follow her everywhere. I recognized a lot of them by face but not name, kids I had helped over a summer school program with our librarian, Ms. Butler, who said if I helped her, she'd give me snacks every time we visited the library on Tuesday and Thursday for class. They were noticeably duller than the three of us, but then again, that could just be that they were younger, and we weren't exactly average for our year. It did make sense for her to seek out people like this because they were the equivalent of fast food to her. A pit stop, fast, low-quality, gratifying for a bit, before she moved on to bigger things. When it came to small friendships like this, she was hunting for something to kill time so she wouldn't be bored, waiting for something she didn't know.

As for myself, I had done something similar. There were these two girls I had gotten “closer” to. I use that word loosely here. I was aware they were spending time with me because I was useful; it's a very kid thing to do, but I associated with them despite that because it was something to pass the time. Boredom was the true enemy to the three of us, not Elanore, not her abuse, none of it. Boredom was the guillotine that awaited all of us. A dead-end job, the monotonous droning of the teachers, the blocks of texts on pages that lacked any vigor, the empty speech between other kids who wanted to get in good graces with each other. All of it lacked any meaning or point. I only then began to understand Elanore, who held the idea that nothing really mattered. When Rachel and I asked her what she meant, she couldn't exactly answer; she only knew that it was the truth to her.

Rachel knew us well enough to know it didn't take much to make us crash into each other. Her evil master plan was simple: for Elanore, who valued presentation and presence the most, all she had to do to get those boys to oust her from the group was to ruin that prim exterior. For me, a note is all it would take. Talli was the supplier of the fart spray Rachel needed, and she planned to terrorize Elanore for five days, but it only took two for results to show. When Elanore wasn't paying attention, she sprayed fart spray on her waistline jacket that she tied there every December to February. A rumor began to spread that Elanore wasn't potty-trained, said in that way to belittle her even more. Even I heard about it, and couldn't help but laugh at how impossible it sounded. Still, it was fun to imagine how furious she would be at that rumor, and furious was an understatement. She said she'd kill whoever was messing with her. She'd never find out it was Rachel, likely because Rachel knew when to cut her victories. Then it came my turn.

For middle school, and even in high school, all it takes to dismantle a friendship between a boy and a girl is to tell the girl the boy has a crush on her. This is the case for many reasons, ranging from the girl being upset that she can't have a normal friendship with a guy without him catching feelings for her, to the boy just being plain ugly, to something in the middle. Rachel knew this better than anyone because she actually had more confessions made to her than anyone I had ever known. It became a kind of gag among the boys in our class to confess to her every Valentine's Day to see if she'd ever give any of them a time of day. The answer was always no, obviously. The only boy who never asked her out was me, and this was mainly because I was too close a friend to her, and knew that this ritual among the boys made her viscerally uncomfortable since she could never be friends with boys normally. I also never really stopped to think about how I felt about her. It just wasn't important for me to think of, and it didn't benefit her if I stopped to think on it, so I didn't. This is all to say that she wrote a note and stuck it in the desks of both girls. They moved their desks next to me so that I could give them answers more easily and we could talk more. The notes held the forbidden knowledge that I had a crush on them, and that I was planning to try and date them both without them knowing. As she was writing the note, Rachel paused to think about the situation. What was it that Elanore found so interesting in me to begin with? *He's pretty boring, uninspiring, and average-looking to me at the least, but then again, Elan's always had a taste for oddballs.* She thought to herself. Rachel put her name at the bottom, and because she wasn't exactly a liar or known as one, that was enough for them.

The following day, Rachel had witnessed Elanore slowly sinking the tip of her lead pencil into a large pink eraser over and over. Gently sliding the lead out of the eraser before firmly pressing it in a new spot. Rachel nudged her seat to get Elan's attention. She looked at Rachel and gestured 'what' with her hand, slowly repeating the motion with her other hand while

maintaining eye contact. Rachel mouthed, "What's wrong with you?" so as not to alert the teacher that they weren't paying attention. Elanore shook her head and brushed Rachel off. Rachel couldn't help but stare at Elanore as she kept poking the eraser. For some reason, the sight brought me to her mind. I had all sorts of odd things I did and still do, like incessantly twirling my pen around my fingers, cracking said fingers, tapping my hands, but Elanore never did anything like that, usually. But there she was, doing something as weird as me. Maybe I had rubbed off on Elanore more than she was willing to admit.

After class, Rachel came to see me sitting at the same old bench during recess, but I hadn't shown up to our two morning classes. I lied when she asked me why.

"I wasn't feeling very well. Asthma and all that. You know how it goes." I said.

"I don't, actually. Not asthmatic." Rachel was curious as to why I skipped our first two classes, or rather, she was curious why I was lying. She knew our first two classes were when I sat next to those girls, but the day after she left those notes, I coincidentally didn't show up? Unlikely story. For some reason, the fact that she knew I was lying made her smile. I've never been someone who likes being lied about, as anyone does, but at that age, especially, it drove me insane when someone lied about me. I was no player.

"Rachel. Why is it that we try to see good things in people?" I looked up into the branches of the old oak tree as wind began to blow harshly, bending the branches. The question made Rachel twitch her head slightly to the side. *What an odd question*, she thought. She walked closer to me as I spoke, but she didn't sit down with me. "I mean, sure, I knew why they were my friends for a little while, but even still, it felt real. To me, at least. What could I possibly have done to justify being called a pervert and a player? I've never even kissed someone, let alone thought of it. How could I possibly..." Rachel felt her heart jolt a bit, a flash of a tug on the



muscle fibers, something like grief. Rachel's presence near me was enough to calm me down a little bit, but even so, I was very mentally lost as to the sudden switch-up of those two girls.

Rachel never expected this to bother me as much as it did, and admittedly, I didn't know why it bothered me so much either. "Do you know anyone, Rachel? I mean, seriously, know someone. Anyone? Could you walk up to anyone and ask them any question about your life, no matter how personal, and could they answer?" I continued to look up through the branches, into the grey sky, up at something I couldn't see. Rachel always wondered what in the world I was looking up at, but I never knew the answer myself. *Just what could it be*, she thought, *what could be so interesting up there?*

"No, I couldn't say I can. Then again, who could realistically? That sounds pretty good as an idea, but what person cares that much about someone who isn't them or their family?" Rachel was surprised I would ask such a pointless question, but to me, it meant everything. She didn't realize just how childish I was until that moment. *Funny, I think that's childish considering we're in middle school, but anyways*, Rachel spoke to herself quite a bit in her mind, something she'd gotten used to forgetting to do when she was with Elanore and me, but now she had ample time to do so without us together.

"I could. I do. I would like to. Maybe that's what makes me so stupid. Maybe that's why I never do anything quite right. Something I do is always weird or not normal. Maybe it all starts there, in that searching for someone who could answer those questions." This very angsty thing I said was mostly because I did weird things. I bit ice cream, for example, and when the two of them found out about it, they mocked me about it for months. It was nothing to them, but the embarrassment for me was deafening. I tapped incessantly on my desk as I thought, something everyone in my class found very annoying. I didn't quite understand when a conversation was

over with people I didn't know, so I kept talking when people wanted to move on from the topic. These are just some contextual examples.

"What do you mean?" Rachel tugged on my shoulder to get me to look at her. I didn't budge, but for some reason, she really wanted me to look at her.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." I wiped my face, stood up, and walked into the crowd of students playing basketball, four-square, and Cops and Robbers. The same games every single day, it drove me mad half the time to see them doing the same thing every day. *Isn't that mind-numbing?* I thought as I walked by. I sat in an empty classroom until I called my parents to check me out for an asthma attack I wasn't having. Rachel's recounting of that day did not end there, as it did for me.

As I was walking away, a gnawing sensation grew in Rachel's stomach. A heavy feeling that made her neck feel thin and her head impossibly large as she fought back the urge to throw up. She began to wonder again why the two girls calling me those names upset me so much, why two people so insignificant in terms of actual time spent with them made me ask those difficult questions. *Someone who actually knows me...absolutely not.* The thought made her shudder. Maybe that's where the nausea came from, but the idea that she could do that for someone else didn't seem so bad to her. The questions I asked her changed her opinion of me. She began to see me as someone worth knowing, if only to see why I took everything so seriously, so dramatically, even by middle school standards. Still, Rachel was hesitant to get closer to me, since she had just deprived Elanore of her group and status with her fart spray scheme. The only people who would illogically associate with Elanore now would be her and me.

As if thinking of her conjured her, Rachel's attention was grabbed by the stillness of a silhouette in the cafeteria, barely visible at the off-angle of a window. It was her, no doubt.

Rachel made her way inside. Elanore was sitting at a window seat in the cafeteria, still silently poking that eraser with her lead pencil. Rachel took a deep breath, hoping she had handled her scheming better than I had. As Rachel walked up to her, the lead snapped inside the eraser; the hole it would've left filled by the glistening, brittle lead. The stain of lead permeated the wound outward. She had been watching me and Rachel talk the entire time. Empty-headed, unsure of what to make of it. She recalled the signs she had noticed when we went to get ice cream some time ago. We had snuck off the school grounds during after-care to a nearby corner store to get some ice cream. When Elanore went inside to get the ice cream with her money, Rachel and I stayed outside talking. She found out that I hated ice cream because my teeth were sensitive. This was when she asked if I bit ice cream instead of licking it, but since I hesitated to answer, she already knew that I did and began to laugh so loud that Elanore came rushing out to figure out why. When Rachel said it was nothing and I agreed, Elanore felt left out, and since I was flushed from embarrassment, she must've gotten the wrong idea. Especially since that was back when she cared a lot about me. How I looked like I was blushing, our closeness, even in passing, must've stuck with her, even at that point, a couple of years later. It began to bother her again, but Elanore couldn't figure out why I seemed just so boring to her at that time.

“What's been on your mind, Elan?” Rachel sat next to her, much more comfortable with getting close to her physically than with me. The two always shared a closeness in this way. Elanore's mother had said before that when they were younger, the two may as well have been conjoined at the hip. Her mother also said she had a friend like that, too, for a while, but they drifted apart after she had found Elanore's father.

“Please don't call me that. We don't talk like that anymore.” Elanore inspected the broken lead on the pencil; despite the sharpness of the snap, the tip inside the pencil looked so smooth that it intrigued her.

“Would you like to?” Rachel smiles as she looks expectantly at Elanore. Rachel hoped calling her that old nickname would make her as warm as she used to be. She never did understand why Elanore became like this. One summer, they didn't talk as smaller kids, and all of a sudden, she was a whole new person. Rachel always wanted to know but never knew when or how to ask. She was afraid of losing Elanore if she didn't want to talk about it. Hoping this could be her moment, she was waiting for the right time to strike the question. “What,” After a moment's pause, as if to answer her own question, “no.” Rachel bit her tongue whenever she had to think really hard about something. Sometimes, the point of her tongue would bleed so much at the end of a particularly hard exam that her front teeth had a reddish hue to them. She was doing the same thing in that moment. “Alright. Why have you been doing that all day?”

“Doing what?”

“That thing with your pencil. Stop stabbing the eraser.”

“I'm not stabbing it, I'm looking at the pencil.” Elanore almost sounded confused, the way someone would be if they weren't actually stabbing the eraser minutes ago.

“I mean, yeah, but you were doing it earlier, I saw you doing it before I got inside, and in the morning too. Stop trying to lie to me.” Rachel began to sound a little annoyed. She had to keep her cool if she wanted to try to rekindle something between them.

“I'm not trying to do anything to you, Rachel. I'm telling you what I'm doing right now, which is not stabbing the eraser. I was doing that earlier, yes.” Elanore sounded a bit more stern, serious. She was finally giving Rachel her actual attention for a second.

“Ugh, you're so annoying with your technical nonsense.” Elanore giggled at Rachel's frustration.

“Oh, I know. I just like doing it for that reason. Why do you ask?” Elanore's smile was slight, unintentional, something *unconscious*.

“About the eraser?” Elanore scoffed at her question.

“What else could I be talking about?” Rachel rolled her eyes at Elanore's attitude.

“Just curious.”

“As always with you.”

“What do you mean?” Elanore was screwing off the top of the lead pencil as Rachel spoke. “You're not the easiest person to know. You don't like answering much about yourself either. I'd hardly call you my friend if I knew any better. I couldn't say much about you other than the basics despite all the time we've had together.” Rachel looked out the window as she spoke.

“The basics like what?” Elanore tapped on the back end of the broken lead gently, forcing it out of the front and onto the table they're sitting at.

“You love the color black, overdone, honestly, vanilla is your favorite ice cream, basic, you're obsessed with your hair, diva, you like to be in nature even though you hate being outside, weird, oh, and your eyes aren't grey like most people think, they're just really light blue, boring. I remember you being a more interesting person, but I guess not.” Elanore was annoyed for a second before the sarcasm hit her. She rolled the lead around the table with her fingers.

“You're not anything special yourself. Just another person who does nothing outside of existing and taking up space. Could anyone say something remarkable about you?” Elanore smiled, but she seemed to have dug too deep with that jab, and Rachel frowned. She quickly masked it with a forced smile.

“Ahem. I also wanted to ask something else.” Rachel's shift in tone was not unnoticed by Elanore, which actually made Elanore feel bad. That kind of feeling was surprising to her as she looked at Rachel, trying to stay cool. She felt obligated to attempt to give Rachel a *real* answer to what this question would be.

“Go on.” Elanore had stopped rolling the lead and began to slowly pick apart the pencil, starting by removing the shaft that contains the spare lead.

“Why is it that you care so much about them?” Rachel's genuine confusion still lingered, though she seemed to have gotten a half-answer from me in the odd way I acted earlier.

“Who?”

“Ice cream biter.” They both smile for a moment at the ridiculousness of me doing that.

“Oh, him? I don't care that much about him, I care about this much.” She picked up a piece of lead; the thinness made it nearly invisible from Rachel's short distance. Just like that, she failed to give Rachel a genuine answer, despite feeling obligated to, doomed to repeat falsity. Could she ever allow herself to be someone real?

“We both know that's a lie.” Rachel reached over Elanore's arms and grabbed the pink eraser. “I'd guess you care this much.” The eraser had very little pink left. The surface, comprised mostly of thick holes and grey lead stains all over, hardly looked like an eraser, more so an oddly soft rock. Elanore stopped taking apart the lead pencil to look at Rachel. She was oddly unnerved by the confidence in Rachel's face as she held up the eraser.

“What do you mean?” Elanore sounded noticeably shaken.

“We both know how weird you get about him. That brings me to my next question. Why did you stop being so weird about him?”

“Weird?”

“Yes, weird, like creepy. You watch him whenever you get the chance to. You could go up and talk to him like normal, but sometimes you just prefer to watch from far away. What about that isn't weird? Do I need to bring up how many times you hit him? It isn't always soft. No normal friend does that.”

“I didn't think you'd noticed.” Elanore sighed and continued to take apart the pencil. The final part, the spring, tumbled out of the empty pencil shaft. She lined up all the pieces neatly and looked at them, content.

“Please, basically the whole school noticed. You forget everyone here has been going to the same school for years? We may not all be friends, but we all know of each other at least.” Elanore blushed. Rachel contorted her face in confusion.

“Sorry, it never hit me how stupid I looked, thinking everything I did was invisible. I just find it a little embarrassing now.” Rachel grabbed her forehead in disbelief, but found Elanore's naivety funny. She doesn't fall for Elanore's tricks, though. Whether intentional or not, she knew Elanore was trying to derail the conversation.

“Can you answer the question now?” Rachel remained persistent.

“Yeah, yeah. Well, he's interesting to say the least. I kind of see myself in them if that isn't too crazy to say.”

“Everything you say is crazy, Elan.” Rachel sighed. Wondering if Elanore would call out the nickname. She didn't.

“Mhm, back to what I was saying. Look, I don't really know. He's nothing crazy, I guess. Something about them is cute if I tried to put a word to it. Hard to say. Like how a puppy is cute when it stumbles around, but in a sulking, quiet kind of way. Imagine someone like Batman, but as a kid with the same personality as the adult version. It's ridiculous, but something about how

he's so dead serious all the time despite nothing mattering is funny. I want to know why he takes himself and everything so seriously. Curiosity is the final answer since that's the case. I'm weird about that idiot because I'm curious and I don't much like the idea of someone else figuring them out before I do." Elanore continued to look at her organized and disassembled lead pencil as she softly reminisced on some memories she had with me. She thought of the ice cream run, the times I let her play with my grown-out hair, the photos she took of me as I had circles ran around me in basketball, and the drawing she made of me looking out the window like I always did. Something about these memories felt very soft to her, like cushions in her mind. Rachel half nodded in understanding and precaution. Wary of seeming too agreeable to what Elanore said, given how she had become somewhat interested in finding out why I always had a chip on my shoulder.

At the same time, Rachel was wondering if this was really what she wanted. She hadn't forgotten when Elanore kissed her on the camping trip. How her heart ached and trembled because she didn't know how to feel about it. She had always thought Elanore was a cool person, but she'd never thought of kissing her. Even so, she admitted to me that as Elanore looked at the organized lead pencil on the cafeteria table, quietly, she had thought of kissing her again for a second. *I would've picked the word sensitive and not serious, but I guess that works, too.* Rachel thought to herself.

"Cute? Like a puppy? That's definitely the weirdest thing you've ever said." Elanore laughed so deeply from her stomach and so suddenly at what Rachel said that it startled her. Elanore couldn't control herself as she struggled to catch her breath from laughter. Finally stammering out some words, she spoke.



"I'm sorry, I didn't realize how that sounded." Rachel slowly nodded, disturbed by Elanore's unusualness since the beginning of this conversation.

"Do you like him, Elanore? Like like?" Elanore finally turns to look at Rachel, away from the pencil. Rachel focuses her eyes, studying them for any sign of hidden intention.

"Is he here?" Elanore looked around as she asked the question in response to Rachel.

"What?" Rachel was thoroughly lost at the way Elanore was acting.

"Is he in the cafeteria somewhere?" Elanore craned her neck to look around.

"Huh? No. What?" Rachel leaned forward.

"Forget it. I don't entirely know. Maybe. It's hard to explain, but I can't stand it when other people talk to him, especially other girls. At least I did? I don't know. I'm kind of feeling that weird feeling again. Maybe we should go look for him. Or maybe, only I should go." Rachel had never seen Elanore so conflicted before. It was an odd sight to see someone so composed, so split. It was almost amusing to her. An odd sense of gratification washed over Rachel. *So she is human after all.* Rachel snickered in the recesses of her mind. Even so, this moment was short-lived as Elanore stood up to leave.

"Wait."

"Yes?" Elanore looked down at her, those piercing light blue eyes of hers that usually unnerved her, felt oddly soft in the air between them.

"Why cute like a puppy?" Elanore looked up for a moment to think before answering.

"That *was* weird. Alright. Cute. Like you." A smile crept onto Elanore's face.

"Huh?" Rachel's voice was so loud that some of the students nearby looked at them for a moment. She almost physically recoiled from Elanore saying something like that.

“I don't know. You're just very cute. It applies to both of you, I suppose.” Elanore grabbed her own chin with her thumb and index finger as she continued. “But I could never be interested in you the way I think I am with him.” Rachel's eyebrows furled; it was taking her time to process exactly what Elanore was saying, because even though she understood, it wasn't exactly hitting her in the moment. Elanore misinterpreted this as sadness. “I'm Catholic. We can't be with other girls.”

“My parents are Catholic too. What does that have to do with us being friends?” Rachel's parents never really spoke about religion with her, outside of the fact that they were Catholic. They wanted her to choose what she was when she was old enough to understand.

“No, I mean like. I can't like like another girl. It says so in the Bible.” Rachel, never having read the bible, didn't have the first clue what she was talking about. Rachel responded in a soft, questioning way.

“Okay?”

With that, Elanore walked off to see what I was up to. But I had already left school early, checked out of class due to an asthma attack I lied about. Elanore, upon finding this out, spent her time in their last class reassembling her lead pencil slowly. Rachel watched on wistfully as the weight of their conversation slowly dawned on her. When she went home that day, tears gently fell from her face as she rocked herself in her bed. Back and forth, repeating. A demand her flesh understood, but her mind didn't; the desire to be comforted. Finally, our friend group was reunited, under Rachel's scheming, which came at a cost greater than she expected.

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There is always a price paid when someone demands to be recognized, when an authority is to be made of someone. Anyone knows this well. It's present in so many normal

human interactions, like teacher-student, boss-employee, bully-victim, colonizer-colonized, oppressor-oppressed, etc. Each dynamic sacrifices something: the students must listen, the oppressed must bend the knee. Each relinquishes a part of their autonomy for the dynamic to function. As clearly shown in these examples, it is not always *willing*. My people have been seeking recognition and aid from the Western world for a long time. They have been crushed under the heel of time and dictatorship in tandem. Each generation, more of our way of life is forgotten, something exacerbated by the dictatorship in Nicaragua that seeks to snuff out what little life remains in my people. Paradoxically, for us to be recognized as humans, the same people who have been slaughtering us like dogs for generations would need to have a change of heart. Those we despise, and despise us in turn, are the only ones who can free us. We rely on their mercy, their grace, in this way. In much the same way, for Nicaragua to be satisfied with our destruction, we must acknowledge them as the ruling authority, to give them what little power we do have over to them. They rely on the final submission of the people they see as savages, monkeys, who stand in the way of “their rightful” natural resources on *our* land. The gold, the gas, the oil, all of it *belongs* to them, but only when we finally acknowledge that and give in. Much in the same way, Elanore could only be the way she was when she had an audience to act for, to perform the play that was her disingenuous self; she needed those whom she sought to dominate and control to be watching, willing or not, worthless or not. The power-hungry, the powerless, they all seem to be in a delicate balance of despising each other but needing each other by definition. This is what I found myself in with Elanore. This is what my people find themselves in with their oppressors. The only difference is that there was no fleeting tenderness in the latter as there was with the former. Still, somewhere in between the lines of those words, oppressor and oppressed, there are people, real people, flowing and mixing in that public space.

People falling in love outside the constructs of this *desire*. The desire to be seen, to be recognized, the same conviction I held as a child, the impossibility of being *seen* runs parallel to the desire of my people to be recognized, to be seen at last by those who seek to ruin them that they are people, too. For me to finally be told by a person that *I can see you. I know who you are*. Being seen in this way is something impossible. It would never be enough. If my people were recognized today, it would not undo the massacres, it would not undo the atrocities, it would not bring my brother back from the dead. If someone could see me in this *real* way, it would not undo the relationships I had with Elanore and Rachel and the people who came after them. History repeats itself because it is not finished with us; it is partially buried, rotting, and the undead demand to be addressed.

### **...A Very Cute Boy**

A cycle demands a break; Elanore and I knew this unconsciously. In our last year of middle school, our fresh collared black uniforms with the burgundy circle around the Fleur-de-Lis over our hearts that marked our seniority, would be the complement to my tender neck. Sometime after Rachel brought us back together and before we graduated sits a memory.

\*

“Let’s play a game of I Spy, Chris. I’m pretty bored.” It was after-care, sometime after 4:00 PM on some random day in the Fall. We were sitting next to each other on the floor in the hallway while the after-care teacher was preoccupied with a couple of kids fighting in the room we were supposed to be in. It was an innocent enough idea to kill the time.

“I spy with my little eye, something red.” Elanore turned over to me with her head dangling down, eyes looking up at me.

“Our uniforms?” Her mouth opened a bit in disbelief at my response.

“You can’t be serious. They’re black.” She let her mouth hang open for a bit while she let out a droning ‘uhhh’ sound after she finished talking.

“I mean, they have red on them.” I pointed to the burgundy circle over my heart. She rolled her eyes.

“I’m so bored.” She dragged the ending -duh sound of ‘bored’ out while lightly hitting her head against the wall we sat against.

“Why are you even in after-care? Don’t your parents get you on time every day?” Elanore smiled for a second before she wiped it off her face.

“I’m waiting for something.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“You’ll see, Chris.”

“Right.” I looked at her, confused, kind of disturbed by how lax she was being. She was never usually so...normal? If you could call her that.

“I spy with my little eye, something door-like in nature.”

“That’s a terrible hint, Elanore.”

“Please, please, call me Ellen. Don’t tell me you already forgot what I said on the camping trip. Are you forgetting all about me, Chris?” She yawned as she said that last sentence.

“Okay. That’s a terrible hint, Ellen.” She chuckled.

“Alright, smart ass. You try.” Even though she wasn’t here, that reminded me of Rachel. Sometimes when I spoke to either of them, it felt like talking to a clone or a reflection. Then again, I’m sure I did the same thing all the time.

“I spy with my little eye, a janitor’s closet.” The hallway was empty, and the lights weren’t on in half the building, even though they were all supposed to automatically turn off at 5:00 PM. The wiring system of our school was skeptical at best; this was just one tell-tale sign of that. The darkness their absence created was slowly peeking in through the odd light here and there that shut off randomly.

“Do you actually know how to play this game, Chris?”

“Not really.”

“Ha. Ha ha ha. Very funny. Why would you agree to play a game you don’t know?” She raised one eyebrow dramatically as a light shut off right above us.

“If I can kill time with it, with someone I care about, why not learn on the way?”

“And how much do you care about me?” I didn’t want to answer immediately. I learned through Rachel just how much a confession ruined friendships between boys and girls. I couldn’t do the same thing to her, despite how not normal everything about the three of us was. Despite it all, the slaps, the shoulder punches that were harder than they should have been, the condescending comments, the weird looks, all of it, it didn’t make me want to hurt her despite my anger. My anger and hatred fade faster than any sadness. Just what was it that she made me feel? My chest felt heavy, my breathing tense; it felt like I was going to drop dead at any moment. I managed to kill the anxiety, if only briefly.

“Enough.”

“Mhm. Well, try again.”

“I spy with my little eye, something locked.” The other lights around us began to shut off, too. There were only three lights around us. Behind her, behind me, and in front of the janitor’s closet, tucked away close by, near a side exit of the building.

“Much better. But that can’t be true. I have the key right here.”

“Huh?” *How in God’s name did she get that?* I wondered.

“Shush. Don’t worry about it, worry about me. Well, don’t worry about me, worry about the game.” Elanore quietly giggled after she spoke. She seemed almost like she was sleepy, in a daze, not fully *there*. Something about her presence changed in that moment. She felt like she was beginning to fill all the dark space around us, like Elanore was everything I couldn’t fully see; she felt unknowably large and stiflingly present.

“You’re not going inside, are you? What would even be the point of that? There’s nothing in there.”

“Not right now, but we will be. Come on. It’ll be cool. Just how many of us have *ever* been inside that closet? It’s a good conversational piece or whatever it’s called. Like saying a girl actually let you get to first base. Wouldn’t that finally make you grown up or whatever you always get mad about?” It was hard to see her, but I could hear the crackle of her lips parting to reveal a smile in the low light around us. I did have a few pet peeves, and being called a child or childish or anything along those lines was one of them. Irony, I know. But everything felt too real to me, my thoughts did not feel my age, every teacher always said I was ahead of the curve, my texts gave me a high school level lexile, I *was* grown up as far as academics cared for. That was what I believed. So why was it that whenever I got squeamish when it came to certain topics around Elanore and Rachel, they called me childish?

“Unnecessary shot, but whatever. Why not, right?” I didn’t know why I asked that question. I knew she wouldn’t answer. Still, it felt necessary to say, it felt comforting to ask, somehow. I had never actually done something against the rules. I prided myself on being a rule follower. I was putting a lot on the line for her in that moment, and for what? I don’t know. She stood up and quietly

walked over to the janitor's closet. The teacher's voice sounded in the distance, which felt impossibly large in the darkness between that door and the room. She was telling the kids who remained to get ready in thirty minutes to wait outside with her, as the doors would automatically lock. When they did, she would call everyone's parents to make sure they were coming for their kids. My parents weren't usually so late. I couldn't imagine what exactly Elanore was waiting for. In the dim light, she waved at me to come to her; the final two lights by where we were sitting fizzled out, and the light above the door was all that remained. The key clicked into place, and the door opened with a muffled crack of paint scraping against the door frame. Inside, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Cleaning supplies, mops, the odd tool here and there, and a yellow, humming lightbulb hanging above us, in the exact middle of the tiny room. Tiny was an understatement, and calling it a closet felt generous. More like a hole in the wall, like someone broke it down and stuck a concrete box here and called it a closet. It couldn't have been wider or longer than a person, but to two kids like us, it felt larger than it should have. I walked in the room first, Elanore behind me.

I spy with my little eye, a very cute boy.

"Wow. Would you look at that? Nothing. It's crazy how right I always am, isn't that right? Ellen?" I ignored that admittedly, very creepy thing she had just said. My voice trembled a bit as I spoke. I expected her to interject as I was gloating, as she tended to do, a simple *would you grow up* response like normal. But she was far too quiet at a time when she usually wouldn't be. I heard the sharp click of a lock settling. I didn't want to turn around, so I pretended to be interested in the lightbulb as I spoke.

"Should we be in here? What if we get locked in? What are you doing? Ellen?"

"Do you ever stop talking?" She took a couple of steps right up to me.



“What did you do?” I pulled my head back as I spoke. I had never actually been so close to her before. I could feel her breathing on my neck.

“You know, Chris, I always wondered how you felt whenever you found out I had another boyfriend.” She spoke in a soft, overly exaggerated, curious voice.

“Why would that matter to me?”

“You tell me. I did some thinking. I spoke with Rachel a lot and asked her how she felt about me. After a lot of time, and a lot of heart-to-hearts with her, I think I finally get it.”

“Get what?”

“Just how idiots like you operate.”

“And how is that?” She gripped my arms, which were stiffly at my sides.

“All it takes is a bit of direction, and you’ll finally listen to me. So just be quiet, and follow me.” The light bulb above us flickered, the golden light bouncing off her skin gently. I felt her grip shift from my arms to my neck so smoothly that I hardly noticed until she began to squeeze. My neck constricted, the veritable itch in my lungs shot through me like lightning. It felt like my asthma, but stronger, like it was trying to kill me, like she was trying to kill me. “Keep this interesting for me,” she whispered, “relax.” Everything in my body convulsed with the urge to flail wildly, to survive, but something about her words pacified me, or maybe my body just froze, but when it did, her grip loosened. “Good.” She hissed. Red swirls wrung my neck in splashes of heat and aches on light brown flesh, coiled in black crescents by my hair. “Keep this a secret for me, would you? You wouldn’t want anyone to know we were in here, isn’t that right?” I didn’t respond, but my silence was enough of an answer for her. “See? That wasn’t too hard. You could really use some work, some teaching for sure. Even those idiots I was with for a couple of days kiss better. But it’s nothing we can’t work on. I’m sure Rachel would have some pointers for you, too.” She giggled as she opened

the door. My body felt hazy, like there was static everywhere my skin should be, and I felt distant from myself. The thought crossed my mind to lunge at her, to strangle her as she had done to me, but my thoughts quickly snapped to nothing. Nothing at all.

When we emerged from the closet, I felt part of myself still trapped inside there, behind that locked door. Elanore had slid the key under the door after she closed it. Any staff would probably think it fell after they locked the door the previous day. She grabbed my hand and slowly led me to the light coming from the room the teacher was in, which barely cut into the darkness of the hallway.

“That was one way to keep things interesting. You’ll have time to learn, and you’ll enjoy it more. Just trust me, okay? Remember, just follow my lead.” I could tell she turned to look at me because the scraps of light that hit us made her silhouette visible, but her face wasn’t there.

“Where did you two go? I thought your parents had already picked you up? I can’t believe you two, I want you both on the line for recess for a week!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. V! We were sitting in the hallway, and I told him the first person to come back into the room after the lights went out was a baby, but we both got too scared, so we agreed to come in together.” Elanore had gotten very good at fake crying over the years. It was a conversational piece to her. A party trick. One she made good use of in moments like this. Ms. V looked at me, and I absent-mindedly nodded along. I was listening, but not fully *there*. Follow her lead was what she said. What more could I want? Right?

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I was nothing more than that for a very long time. History and I were good friends because we both have the habit of doing the same thing over and over again, except I thought something would change. To say that I didn’t play along to the sound of Elanore’s voice would be a lie; I needed to enjoy it. I don’t think I would have survived her if I didn’t convince myself that this was

something willing. I was familiar with her games; her brain moved in patterns that were recognizable at times, and I could hear her condescending voice already if I ever tried to break free. *No one was there with us, who's to say who did what? Who would they believe? Chris, or me?* They could be anyone. Friends, family, teachers, police, it didn't matter. Anyone *else*. Every *other* person who wasn't us or Rachel. I couldn't even bring myself to look Rachel in the eye most of the time after that day because I knew she pitied me. I could feel it without her ever saying it, and it drove me mad, but what could I have done? No one was coming to save me. I had to do it myself, or pray that somehow, I lucked my way out of this, that somehow, maybe, she would be a better person.

My father hated being looked down on as much as I did. He hated being seen as a helpless native, some noble savage caught in a time not meant for him, surrounded by people who pitied him and wept for him while his people continued to bleed, their flesh and spirit being lapped up by the cracked and dry soil beneath them from all the ecological damage their land had endured. The earth craves sustenance, and it does not discriminate between blood, oil, or water. What are they to do? What are my people to do? Sit idly by and wait for the ground beneath them to devour them as time and violence wear them down to footprints preserved in clay? Are they to wage another bloody war? Is the only solution to something like this the inevitable oblivion of one or both sides? What of the onlookers? What of those who mourn a place and time they never knew? The questions can continue forever, each one melting into another, ceaselessly into nothingness, the same way I let myself do when I was with Elanore. She had killed me so many times that I left pieces of myself all over that school. I needed to subsist. To remain somewhere. I got lucky because the inexorable wall that was graduation, death, got to me. The one *real* filter that separated childhood from adolescence arrived just in time for me to still remember my original sin, my primal hope, that I could connect with someone in earnest. That we, whoever that may be, could truly know each other, a mutual

witnessing. A connection that could not be denied. I would never be something complete without it. Maybe this could be the same answer for my people? To try our luck, but how good had that done us? Maybe the “*my*” in people was the issue. That they did not belong to me because I did not know who I really was outside of what I was missing. I had never stopped to think about myself, not in relation to what wasn’t there. Could the only way for survival be to stop looking at that which was taken from us, that which we are lacking now, and begin to look at what remains, and what we can cherish from that? Or is that just another childish thought waiting to be exploited?

What was taken from me? Many of my firsts belonged to her, but what *my* was speaking when I thought that? Which I? Why did it have to be hers? What remained for me if not the memory? Who could tell me that I had lost it? It was never something tangible, nothing material; it was always something felt, something shared in a knowing glance between two humans of a group, whether it be a people or a class. That was the thing, no one could say it was taken from me, if I carried it with me, in every person I would become, as time tried to wear me down to footprints all over again. Even if Elanore was far from leaving my mind in peace, I didn’t have to define who I would be around who she was. I could move beyond her even if she continued to exert her presence on me. This would be my greatest resistance to savagery, continuing to be.